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Grapes, for sheer goodness

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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April is pruning time for vineyards -- and not just in the Napa and Sonoma valleys of California, but also in the back yards of New Jersey.

Though our humid summers aren't conducive to commercial table grape production, home gardeners have had success with Arkansas-bred varieties that flourish in east coast growing conditions, such as Reliance, a seedless pinkish grape.

"If you ever tasted Reliance, you'd never have a Thompson Seedless again," said Gary Pavlis, an agricultural agent and grape specialist with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County in Mays Landing.

But for the great majority of the Garden State's grape lovers -- who are more likely to push a shopping cart than wield a pruning shears -- plenty of fresh

grapes can be picked year 'round at local supermarkets.

"We're at the tail end of the Chilean season. It's starting to wind down," said Joe Granata of RLB Distributors in West Caldwell, which supplies the Kings Super Markets with fresh produce. Still, consumers will be able to select from red, white (as in green) and blue-black grapes from Chile until shipments cease on April 20, according to a protocol between the Chilean and U.S. governments.

"Then we'll start to see grapes from the Imperial Valley and the San Joachin Valley in California," explained Tom Carl Tjerandsen, managing director for North America of the Chilean Fresh Fruit Association in Sonoma. "Chile will again start shipping grapes to the U.S. just before Christmas."

Though our calendar says spring, one of the most flavorful varieties currently available from the southern hemisphere is a black seedless called Autumn Royale, according to Granata. "The flavor is absolutely outstanding. They are just so sweet," he said. But, for the most part, he said, customers aren't buying them. Paul Corrado of Corrado's Family Affair in Clifton, agrees. "I think people are used to red and white seedless grapes. The black isn't as popular, even though it's very good. It's one of my favorites," he said.

"Twenty years ago, you couldn't give red seedless grapes away. Now red grapes outsell green," said Granata. To encourage American consumers to try even darker-skinned varieties, "some retailers are experimenting with rainbow packs of about a third each -- red, green and black," said Tjerandsen. At Costco in Hackensack last week, green, red and black grapes were all priced at \$5.99 -- but consumers got five pounds of Chilean black grapes at that price, compared to four pounds of Chilean red or green grapes.

Still, there's a lot of catching up to do. In 2007, North America imported 16 million boxes of green Thompson Seedless grapes from Chile, along with 15 million boxes of Crimson Seedless and 11 million boxes of Flame Seedless, two red varieties, compared to fewer than two million boxes of black grapes.

Some retailers, such as Corrado, contend that California grows sweeter grapes than Chile, but Tjerandsen disagrees. "They're the same varieties, in the same growing conditions." And thanks to new eight-lane highways built exclusively for trucks to speed delivery to Chile's airports, "fruit from the valleys of Chile can arrive sooner than grapes from California," he added.

In "The Organic Food Shopper's Guide" (Wiley, \$14.95), Jeff Cox noted, "Grapes are the flavor chameleons of the fruit world. Some grapes taste of strawberries, others of black currants, still others of apples, or lemons or plums." The best grapes for a particular shopper, then, will be the grapes that taste best to that shopper.

"As grapes age, they begin to shrivel," wrote Cox. "Feel the grapes; they should be plump and turgid, not soft. Hold a bunch up and give it a gentle shake; no grapes should fall off." Grapes are berries and, like all berries, they do not ripen once off the vine. A powdery finish, known as "bloom," signals freshness, as do green, moist stems for most varieties.

The authors of "Joy of Cooking" lyrically note that "for the finest bouquet in table grapes, remove them from the refrigerator about an hour before serving. Rinse in a refreshing bath of cool water into which you have stirred a splash of lemon juice or wine vinegar." To serve as dessert, they advise

shears on the table." Chances are it would probably be easier to find a pair of pruning shears instead.

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